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## Grotesque in Diaz's *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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### Abstract

According to the definitions of grotesque, isolation, repression and alienation are the key features of it. The protagonist Oscar of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the Dominican-American boy, suffered ignorance from family, contempt from others and identity confusion from society. From physical appearance and spiritual level, Oscar is regarded as a grotesque with the disharmony, unsatisfaction, depression in his inner world. All the barriers which contribute to his grotesqueness are overcome at last when he pursues his love without fear.

**Key words:** Grotesque; Alienation; Identity confusion; Repression

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### INTRODUCTION

Junot Diaz is an illustrious Dominican-American writer, whose masterpiece, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, earning him more reputation. His other works include *Drown* (1996) and *This is How You Lose Her* (2012). All of his works have a common subject: life of the Dominican-American. He

emigrated with his family from Dominica to America when he was 6 years old. Due to his own immigrant background, he has found great success in depicting the life of the Dominican-American, knowing the immigrant life inside out.

Taking the Trujillo tyranny in the Dominican Republic as the background, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* unfolds the tragedy of the three generations in the de Leon family before readers. The title indicates that the novel seems to be about Oscar's having a wondrous life. However, on the contrary, it is a tragic story about a Dominican family in America as well as the history of Dominican Republic. The novel not only concentrates on Oscar's story, but also diagnoses the illnesses of the Dominican-American society, deeply revealing the inner heart of the Dominican.

Since its publication, the novel took the literary scene by storm and many critics and readers by surprise. The research perspectives include history rewriting, post-colonialism, gender study, narrative techniques and science fiction, which provide valuable insights to the study of novel. This paper aims to analyze the grotesque image in the novel, expecting to offer a fresh perspective to the novel and enrich its researches.

Baldick defined that grotesque is "characterized by bizarre distortions, especially in the exaggerated or abnormal depiction of human features. The literature of the grotesque involves freakish caricatures of people's appearance and behavior, as in the novels of Dickens. A disturbingly odd fictional character may also be called a grotesque" (Baldick, 2000). This shows that the important feature of grotesque is its abnormal appearance and behavior, so grotesque is always associated with the words "ugly, weird, and distorted". Professor Philip Thomson, the author of *The Grotesque* (1972), claimed that disharmony, which leads to their isolation, is the most distinguished characteristic of the grotesque (Thomson, 1972). Therefore, it can be said that the disharmony,

isolation, alienation are the features of grotesqueness.

According to these definitions, it can be easily seen that the protagonist Oscar, who is dramatically unattractive in appearance, extremely solitary and alienated in characters, completely weird and nerdy in others' eyes, desperately confused by racial identity and gender stereotypes, isolated and excluded by the outside world, is definitely regarded as a grotesque. Isolation, repression and alienation are the key features of the grotesque, Oscar.

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## 1. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FEATURES OF THE GROTESQUE

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### 1.1 Alienation

Alienation is one of the psychological features of the grotesque, which means the state of being foreign, alien and isolated to the world in which people exist and live. The term alienation comes from the Greek word which originally means the transfer of ownership. And then, it refers to the estrangement between people. In other words, alienation makes the relationship between human beings go far away from each other, causing cold links and uncommunication. When one has the feeling of being excluded, he will be lost in loneliness and will not express himself freely because he is in great need of sharing something common in society.

In *Oscar Wao*, this kind of feeling of alienation can be found easily and widely. None of the grotesques are able to break the walls they build around them, because among them exists the definite difficulty of communication. The sense of alienation can be perceived from the pitiful grotesque Oscar. Oscar is regarded as a grotesque by others as an "Ghetto Nerd" (Diaz, 2007, p. 1).

Sophomore year Oscar found himself weighing in at a whopping 245; Had none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male. Couldn't play sports for shit, or dominoes, was beyond uncoordinated, threw a ball like a girl. Had no knack for music or business or dance, no hustle, no rap, no G. And most damning of all: no looks. (Diaz, 2007, p. 20)

Huge and overweight body, wild hair, a pair of close-set eyes and enormous glasses all contribute to his retarded and awkward look. People around him exclude him, and even his mother added insult to injury: "...the next day at breakfast he asked his mother: Am I ugly? She sighed. Well, hijo, you certainly don't take after me" (Diaz, 2007, p. 30). From physical appearance, Oscar is regarded as a grotesque and gets alienation from the surrounding world. At school, he is regarded as "fat lonely nerd" by classmates (Diaz, 2007, p. 20), so no one is willing to share a room with him. Every day he walks into school lonely, and has to endure the others' laughing at and fooling around.

Importantly, Oscar is a grotesque on a spiritual level. He is taken as a "sci-fi-reading nerd" (Diaz, 2007, p. 19). Oscar is extremely crazy about the science fiction and

comic books. When all other kids are playing outside, Oscar hides himself in a secret small room, moving hungrily from books to books, author to author, age to age. He turns to the comic books to seek comfort in a virtual world, avoiding the hush comments and discrimination around him. Only in the science fiction world can he feel the satisfaction, and imagine himself as a hero, which is completely opposite to the reality. Therefore, he gets much more difficulties in communicating and establishing intimate relationship with the outside world.

Although he yearns for interpersonal communications, Oscar could hardly communicate with others. He has the desperate desire to talk to people, but from most of them, he gets rejection and exclusion. "Couldn't make friends for the life of him, too dorky, too shy, and too wired", the only way for him to express his feeling out is writing (Diaz, 2007, p. 17). The things he fails to achieve in reality will be realized in his novel. Suffering both physical and spiritual contempt by others, Oscar is blocked behind the wall of communication with people and becomes the grotesque in others' eyes.

### 1.2 Identity Confusion

Identity confusion is another important feature of Oscar's grotesqueness. As a Dominican-born boy who is living in America, facing the cultural conflicts is inevitable. Oscar's mother, Belicia, is the typical Dominican mother, insisting on the traditional education on her children. As the first immigrant generation, it is hard for Belicia to receive and accept the totally new and different culture in America. But for the second immigrant generation born in America, Oscar and his sister Lola have the strong desire to absorb pop culture and join in the mainstream. Thus, two different culture conflicts puzzle and unsettle him.

Social stereotypes intensify Oscar's identity confusion and frustration. "No Dominican male has ever died a virgin" is a household word (Diaz, 2007, p. 180). People hold their own truth that all the Dominican males must have the qualities of good look, slickness with the ladies, athleticism, rhythm, and shrewdness. Oscar, "an ugly overweight freaks" however, "trembled with fear in gym class" (Diaz, 2007, p. 19). His extreme cowardice and clumsiness make him doubt about whether he is a real Dominican. "The kid of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads: You're not Dominican" (Diaz, 2007, p. 49). External comments and remarks confuse him deeply. His hybridity causes his inner disharmony. He is completely alienated by the surroundings and the society he lives in, going through a plight of contradiction and confusion.

Lacking identity causes the emptiness of inner world. Being haunted by loneliness and rootlessness, Oscar spends and endures a depressing life day after day. Suffering the discrimination and prejudice, he has been struggling with his own identity and distorted to a grotesque with mental disorder.

### 1.3 Repression

Invisible but long-term mental damages will be caused when one fails to meet his elementary physiological needs. Trying to repress the natural sexual desires can lead to frustration and depression. Sexual desire is the vital and powerful drive for human, providing the positive feelings of intimacy, security, self-worth, and joy. Oscar is the one who has strong sexual desire but has to repress it constrainedly.

Although Oscar is taken as a sci-fi-reading nerd, he has a great passion for girls and desperately wants to be involved in a romantic relationship. "His affection--that gravitational mass of love, fear, longing, desire, and lust that he directed at any and every girl in the vicinity without regard to looks, age, or availability--broke his heart each and every day" (Diaz, 2007, p. 23). The harmonious and close intimacy is what Oscar wants most and desperate for. However, the fact proves that, due to his unattractiveness and low masculinity, Oscar suffers constant failure and fails to win girls' favor and affection: "No girl ever really seemed to notice it; he cried often for his love of some girl or another. Cried in the bathroom, where nobody could hear him" (Diaz, 2007, p. 23). Encountering rejection and neglect from the opposite sexes, Oscar suffered great depression and had to repress his desire, which made him extremely frustrated and inferior, for "he no longer went anywhere near the girls" (Diaz, 2007, p. 17). Therefore, Oscar repressed his desire compulsively which made his nature badly distorted. It is a way that the grotesques tend to constrain the passion as well as human relationship, making self-repression and being depressive and alienated.

## 2. CAUSES OF THE GROTESQUENESS

### 2.1 Being Isolated for the Lack of Love

Lack of love is one of the main reasons that lead to Oscar's grotesqueness. Oscar feels deadly lonely and yearns for exchange of love. Once he wrote to his sister: "I've waited forever to be in love, how many times I thought this is never going to happen to me" (Diaz, 2007, p. 47). In want of parental caring and friendship, Oscar becomes completely isolated. Parental love plays a significant role in children's emotional development. Secure and healthy relationships between caregivers and children are likely to provide protection from negative effects in childhood. Due to the insufficiency of parental love, Oscar inevitably suffers the disharmony and distortion, which contributes to his grotesqueness.

First of all, father's absence makes Oscar mentally vulnerable. "Children who have an involved father are more likely to be emotionally secure, be confident to explore their surroundings, and, as they grow older, have better social connections with peers" (Yeung, 2000). Absence of father exerts a negative influence on children's

cognitive ability, educational achievement, psychological well-being, and social behavior.

Oscar has no access to the ideas of masculinity because of father's absence, while low masculinity intensifies his confusion and depression. "It wasn't just that he [Oscar] didn't have no kind of father to show him the masculine ropes, he simply lacked all aggressive and martial tendencies...Oscar had like a zero-combat rating" (Diaz, 2007, p. 15). Father, who plays a significant role in children's character building, is absent from Oscar's life.

Secondly, Oscar is short of maternal love. Mother-child bonding has an inseparable relation with child's emotional, social and psychological development. According to Bowlby, "the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his mother in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment" (Bowlby, 1995). However, the shortage of maternal love keeps Oscar from obtaining such intimacy and caring.

Oscar's mother, Belicia, avoids close emotional ties with her children Oscar and Lola. She treats them in a harsh way and leaves no time to be with them by taking three part-time jobs at the same time. "You could call her an absentee parent: if she wasn't at work she was sleeping" (Diaz, 2007, p. 54). What's more, "She hauled Oscar to his feet by his ear...She threw him to the floor..." (Diaz, 2007, p. 14). What he got from his mother is yelling and punishment anywhere and anytime. Oscar can hardly feel the warmth and intimacy he needs, which sets emptiness in his inner heart and causes permanent sense of isolation.

Above all, due to the absence of father, Oscar has no ideas of the masculinity and fails to get the encouragement, protection and guidance. Meanwhile, he is also deprived of the feelings of warmth, tenderness and carefulness which should be offered by a mother. Thus, his sense of security totally vanishes and he encounters more difficulties in establishing intimate relationship with others. All of these factors contribute to his grotesqueness.

### 2.2 Being Alienated for Double Marginalization

Dilemma of double marginalization intensifies Oscar's identity crisis. Living in a multicultural environment, the Dominican immigrants inevitably suffer the cultural conflicts. Oscar, the second-generation of the Dominican diasporas is greatly challenged. He has to acquire the American culture in school and receive Dominican culture at home. He is stuck in the two completely distinct cultures and obsessed with the cultural differences. Cultural conflicts result in their sense of confusion and rootlessness.

Double marginalization gives rise to Oscar's alienation from society. In the United States, he and his family are ranked as the social bottom with poor economic condition and low-level education. Yet when he returns to his homeland attempting to gain the sense of belonging, what he gets is merely strangeness and exclusion. He is labelled

as the "American citizen", excluded as the "outsiders". Thus, this situation drives him to suffer the psychological displacement, and intensifies their sense of rootlessness, insecurity, and isolation.

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### 3. STRUGGLING A WAY OUT

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Saren, who is the father of existentialism, insists that human beings should struggle with something meaningless, hopeless in life until they get out of the living state of boredom because human life is the one in which so much crisis exists. The grotesque Oscar makes great efforts to struggle a way out of the choking life.

Writing is a way for Oscar to reconcile with himself and the reality. Suffering constant rejections from girls, friends and his community, Oscar could hardly communicate with others. However, he empowered himself by writing down all his feelings and thoughts. He has been writing all the time and finished 5 books in the end. The things he fails to achieve in reality will be realized in his novel, which provides a way for him to express his suppressed feeling. It is his writing and constant expressing that helps him ease the emotional pain and go through the most difficult time.

Facing the problem and pursuing his love bravely help him get over his grotesqueness. Suffering mockery, contempt, and misunderstanding from the surroundings, even encountering the threat from Dominican officers, Oscar faces the situation bravely with great courage and does not avoid it. When Oscar met Ybón, a thirty-year-old prostitute, who can listen to him and offer him caring and warmth, Oscar finally gets what he wants and gathers enough courage to pursue it. He unhesitatingly went to the Dominican Republic to find her and spent several short but wonderful days together, regardless of his family's opposition as well as Ybón's boyfriend's warning, a powerful officer in Dominica. He is timid and coward in his families' and friends' eyes always; he is laughed at by others by his low masculinity; and he is desperate that he cannot get love in his love. However, in the end, when he meets the right person who tries to be close with him, to know his inner heart from appearance, his love, his courage, his brief and his masculinity, all are awakened. All the barriers which contribute to his grotesqueness disappear.

Although he was shot to death by the subordinates of Ybón's boyfriend, his alienation, identity confusion and repression all come to relief, and his longing for love and intimate relationship with others are finally achieved. At the end of the life, Oscar rethinks his worldview, reconciles with his grotesqueness and gets rid of it at last by struggling hard.

Oscar's life is indeed brief, and it even seems miserable. However, he successfully breaks his personal limits to complete his self-transformation and get out of his grotesqueness.

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### CONCLUSION

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Presenting a vivid picture of Dominican immigrants' life in American society, Diaz reveals Oscar's behavior and inner struggles to make readers understand the essence of things and the roots of being grotesque. He suffers the contempt and alienation from others because of his physical appearance, as well as his "book nerd", timid and coward character. Being the Dominican boy but lacking traditional masculinity, he is denied by his community. His sexual desire gets repression because of consecutive rejection and neglect. Therefore, alienation, identity confusion, as well as repression are the main psychological features of Oscar, which contribute to his grotesqueness. However, by confronting with his inner trauma and trying to write it out, Oscar grows up in mind and finds a way to get out of his grotesqueness at last.

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